

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

*Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240*

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EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:30pm, DECEMBER 24, 2004

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) yesterday wrote to President George W. Bush expressing its concern about the violent attacks in Iraq targeting religious places of worship, holy sites, and individual members of religious communities. The escalation of religious terror since August is having a particularly devastating effect on many of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities-the ChaldoAssyrians, Mandeans, and Yizidis-who are reportedly fleeing the country in ever increasing numbers, raising questions about the very survival of these ancient communities. In the letter, the Commission urgently requested a meeting with the President to discuss this dire situation and made a number of specific recommendations.

The experience of the ChaldoAssyrians, Mandeans, and Yizidis are but a few examples of the violence against religious communities in Iraq. "Worshippers at Shia mosques have also been targeted by insurgent bombs, and both Shia and Sunni clerics have been victims of assassination attempts, in some cases reportedly for their perceived moderate stance," said USCIRF Chair Preeta D. Bansal.

USCIRF Co-Vice Chair Nina Shea said, "It is crucial that the U.S. government take measures to safeguard and support Iraq's terrorized religious minorities and places of worship. Increasing security for religious minorities and channeling U.S. reconstruction and election resources directly to them will reinforce the willingness of these groups to stay in their homeland, and enable them to participate fully in the upcoming elections, and thus have their voices heard in the drafting of the permanent constitution."

"As a direct consequence of this ongoing violence, tens of thousands of Iraqi Christians have reportedly fled their homeland in recent months. During this holiday season, the Commission's letter reminds everyone of the need for urgent measures to be taken to protect religious minorities, particularly the ChaldoAssyrians, the largest non-Muslim minority in Iraq, which has a long history of persecution," said USCIRF Co-Vice Chair Felice D. Gaer.

The text of the letter follows:

Dear Mr. President,

Knowing of your interest in our work on religious freedom, we wish to take this opportunity to raise a matter of deep concern that requires your Administration's immediate attention.

As you are aware, religious places of worship, holy sites, and individual members of religious communities have been targeted by recent violence in Iraq. The escalation of religious terror since August is having a particularly devastating effect on many of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities-the ChaldoAssyrians, Mandeans, and Yizidis-who are reportedly fleeing the country in ever increasing numbers, raising questions about the very survival of these ancient communities. We urgently request a meeting with you to discuss this dire situation.

The magnitude of the crisis is most strikingly illustrated by the plight of Iraq's largest non-Muslim minority, the ChaldoAssyrians, whose church was among the first in Christian history and whose people are a unique ethnic group indigenous to Iraq. This minority has had a long history of persecution and marginalization in Iraq, including being forced by Saddam Hussein to deny its ethnicity and claim either Arab or Kurdish identity. Nevertheless, through the centuries they have kept intact their Aramaic language, their cultural traditions and the practice of their faith, and today they constitute approximately three percent of the population. However,

as part of the ongoing violence-and as a direct consequence of their religious identities and perceived support for the United States-this community now faces a looming threat to its continued existence in Iraq.

This threat manifests itself daily and in many forms, as has been reported by the media: abductions, abuse, extra-judicial killings, and the unlawful imposition of Islamic codes of dress and behavior. Perhaps most ominous has been an ongoing series of simultaneous church bombings each month since August. The persecution described in such press accounts is compounded by additional reports that Kurdish authorities are facilitating the takeover of ChaldoAssyrian property and villages, and have discriminated against the ChaldoAssyrian community in the reconstruction and development of its villages and areas.

As a direct consequence of this ongoing violence, tens of thousands of Iraqi Christians have reportedly fled their homeland in recent months, uprooting their families to Jordan and Syria, where they are impoverished and not given the refugee status that would allow them to work.

The ChaldoAssyrians are an educated and skilled community, who strongly support the formation in Iraq of a liberal democracy that protects the human rights of every individual. Their continued exodus from Iraq would signal the demise of one of the world's historic religious communities, and also would diminish the country's prospects for political and economic development. The Iraqi interim government and some prominent Muslim leaders, notably Ayatollah al-Sistani, have acknowledged the inherent harm this onslaught against the non-Muslim minority poses for the country's future and have publicly condemned it.

The experience of the ChaldoAssyrians is one example of the violence against religious communities in Iraq. Worshipers at Shia mosques have also been targeted by insurgent bombs, and both Shia and Sunni clerics have been victims of assassination attempts, in some cases reportedly for their perceived moderate stance. More than 300 Iraqis reportedly have been forcibly tried before extra-judicial religious courts that impose an extremist version of Islamic law. Furthermore, reportedly in some places women are being compelled to wear Islamic dress, and university campuses are enforcing separate entrances, classrooms, and campuses for men and women.

Taken together, such assaults on religious freedom constitute an egregious denial of fundamental human rights, and threaten the stability of a unified Iraqi state, as well as the ultimate success of U.S. policy objectives in the region. To protect freedom of religion and belief

in Iraq, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends the U.S. government take the following steps:

1. Create and dispatch joint Iraqi-Coalition taskforces where a demonstrated threat exists to help protect religious minorities and places of worship. This is particularly urgent as there is a rising fear of attacks timed to coincide with the Christmas season. Increasing the level of security for religious minorities will reinforce the willingness of these groups to participate in upcoming elections.

2. Channel proportional reconstruction and relief funds directly to the ChaldoAssyrian community rather than exclusively through Kurdish- or Arab-run governorates. There are reports that reconstruction funding earmarked for the governorate level is not reaching the ChaldoAssyrian villages; such a measure will ensure that the community is able to rebuild basic infrastructure in its villages-including water and electrical systems, school facilities, and housing-free from reported discriminatory allocation practices on the part of local government. In addition, raise the reports of ChaldoAssyrian property and villages being taken over with the regional Kurdish authorities, and seek assurances from them that there will be no discrimination practiced against this community.

3. Give clear directives to American officials and recipients of U.S. democracy-building grants to assign priority to ensuring that strong guarantees of the right of every Iraqi to freedom of religion and belief, including an endorsement of equality for women, and other fundamental human rights of the individual will be included in the permanent constitution. Such provisions are incorporated in Iraq's Transitional Administrative Law, and official American advisors should work during the course of the drafting process of the permanent constitution to ensure that they will be carried over.

4. Bar all direct U.S. election funding and support to Iraqi political groups that fail to endorse strong constitutional safeguards for individual's human right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief, and related human rights. U.S. resources should be used to support groups and individual candidates who advocate the freedom of religion and belief.

5. Publicly encourage the eligible electorate within the half million-strong Iraqi-American community to participate in the upcoming Iraqi elections and facilitate this process by making available U.S. facilities, resources, and expertise as necessary.

When the Commission issued its annual report last May, it urged you to appoint a high-level U.S. human rights envoy to Iraq who will encourage the incorporation of human rights principles in Iraq's permanent constitution, serve as the point of contact for Iraqi human rights institutions, and facilitate access to American expertise and other assistance to support Iraq's effort to confront human rights challenges. The Commission reiterates this recommendation with the conviction that the need is all the more pressing as Iraq takes critical steps over the next year toward National Assembly elections, the drafting and adopting of a permanent constitution, and the country's first constitutionally-based national elections.

Safeguarding the right of everyone to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and protecting the human rights of members of religious minorities is a bellwether for assessing the viability of democratic rule. Without the right to religious freedom, guaranteed in law and observed in fact, Iraqi non-Muslim minorities will be persecuted and driven out, and Iraqi Muslims, particularly women and dissident reformers, will be stifled and suppressed.

The Commission is eager to discuss these urgent matters with you in person at your earliest convenience.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Preeta D. Bansal

Chair

**The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Preeta D. Bansal ,
- Felice D. Gaer ,